Irving Penn:
No Expiration Dates

By AnnMarie McCracken

In an Irving Penn grey tone photograph, two women sit at a café table, relaxed yet chic (Figure 1). They seem to be women living in the city and working to earn their own. The photo is from a different time, yet it appears timeless, perhaps because it is in black and white. The light sources accentuate the women, bringing them into a direct yet somehow soft focus. In a word, the photo is striking, the women are striking, and they came together to create a moment with impact. The man who took the photo, Irving Penn, spent his entire life perfecting photography. He dedicated himself to his photography and eventually shaped himself into a legend. How did Irving Penn create images that stand the test of time, even today when images can be so plentiful and insignificant? Penn's photos, no matter the subject or oeuvre, withstand time and never fail to leave an impression.

Penn wasn't born knowing he wanted to become a photographer. He went to art school and studied under his idol, Alexey Brodovitch, and eventually became Brodovitch's assistant. He would sketch and paint small pieces to be featured in *Harper's Bazaar* and eventually save up the money to buy his beloved Rolleiflex, his first camera. He became the art director at Saks Fifth Avenue and stayed there for two years, until he decided to go down to Mexico to paint while World War II carried on. He ended up realizing that his painting wasn't the best and he destroyed all of the paintings he did during this time in Mexico. Yet he had also been doing a bit of photography in Mexico, which he didn't destroy (Liberman 10). From that point on, his photography built upon itself naturally until he couldn't separate his mind or heart from it.

When Penn travelled to Mexico, he had offered his job of art director to Alexander Liberman, whom he had heard of from Brodovitch. Liberman declined, but when Penn returned from Mexico, Liberman in turn offered him a job working as his assistant at *Vogue*. Liberman was intrigued by Penn, saying "Penn gave up the job of art director at Saks Fifth Avenue - a job that most commercial artists would in 1941 cling to like a drowning man to a raft - in order to find out (among other things) how good a painter he was, or might become" (Szarkowski 7). This intrigue is what led Liberman to take a chance on hiring Penn to work with him; he knew the dedication that Penn felt for art and he believed it would pay off greatly (Szarkowski 7). This is where the legendary career of Irving Penn began.

Penn's work at *Vogue* took up a great deal of his life. *Vogue* is widely considered to be one of the world's top magazines, and it is considered number one in the fashion magazine world. The photography featured in *Vogue* is typically regarded as the best of its kind. Many photographers peruse *Vogue* simply for the photographs featured in its pages. Bert Stein, another well-respected photographer, claims to have fallen in love with photography after seeing one of Penn's still lives in the magazine when he was only eighteen (Fraser 127). This is only one of countless instances where another photographer or an editor idolized and complimented Penn on his work in *Vogue*. This reveals how highly Penn and his work was valued in the world of photography.

Penn did many pieces for *Vogue*, yet they were not simply assignments that he completed for the payment. He transformed his assignments into something memorably his own. Liberman claimed that he never discussed assignments with the photographers, except with Penn. He and Penn would talk for hours about an assignment, collaborating on ways to create the perfect photo for that specific topic (Fraser 100). Penn was permitted to basically photograph whatever he wanted, however he wanted, and he often would simply pitch his ideas to *Vogue* and get the okay to go ahead (Fraser 69). His project *Petits Métiers* (*Small Trades*) (Figures 3-5) and all of his "ethnic" works (Figures 6-8) were his own ideas that *Vogue* approved, supported, and financed.

Small Trades was a project that Penn had aspired to create for many years, inspired by Eugene Atget's photographs on the same topic (Heckert 10). One of his assistants during the project, Edmonde Charles-Roux, said Penn's work was "informed by a concern for history" (Heckert 26). Penn knew that these people, jobs, lifestyles, would not be around forever. He wanted to document these métiers before they were gone (Heckert 26). He certainly did make an impact on people with these photographs. Every photo from the project, whether it was in Paris, New York, or London, was a black and white image of a man or women in their working clothes. The subjects were not made up to be anything but what they were, hardworking citizens covered in the grime of a labor that they took pride in. There is no segregation in the photos. The people were chosen right off the streets, no matter their job, their appearance, their age, anything. Penn treated all of his subjects equally and was said to be able to shift between drastically different subjects with little to no effort (Heckert 10). Penn was able to convey the different cities through the pictures he created and he was able to convey the character of the workers as if they were simply walking down the street on a normal weekday. The workers in these photos hold their heads high, carry materials with weathered hands, sometimes smile, sometimes appear as if they are thinking of what they will be working on next. Penn created a connection with these people through the respect he gave them which allowed them to feel

comfortable in front of the imposing eye of his camera. Penn felt a strong kinship with the men and women he photographed that was based upon their mutual honesty of self with each other. "Taking people away from their natural circumstances and putting them into the studio in front of a camera did not simply isolate them, it transformed them. Sometimes the change was subtle, sometimes it was great enough to be almost shocking. But always there was transformation" (Penn 9). Penn allowed people to be themselves in front of his camera and it resulted in photographs of truth. These photos can still impact us today because labor workers are still around, contributing to society. To see them represented as Penn portrayed them is a breath of fresh air, a break from our modern anxieties.

When Penn travelled the world and took photographs of people rarely seen by westerners in the 40s to 70s. He was able to give people a glimpse into a world they may never have seen without him. He visited Crete, Dahomey, Cameroon, Nepal, New Guinea, Morocco, and more. In each place he noted different reactions, from girls blatantly flirting with the camera to people who had never even seen a camera until Penn came along. Along with his photos, Penn made observations as if his mind was its own camera. Of the elderly men and women in Crete (Figure 7), he said "There is a beauty of wear and age in their faces… deep-lined, burned by the sun, the eyes the most alive part of them" (Penn 27). In Dahomey he recalled "We had, of course, no language together, but I don't remember the lack" (Penn 36). He travelled to Cuzco, Peru and took photos of the villagers there (Figure 6). These people had at first been rather put-off by Penn and his crew, but after sitting for him only once, many people returned for several more days to be photographed (Penn 10). Through all the places he travelled, all the people he photographed, Penn recorded written accounts of his impressions. He connected with people because he wasn't simply taking photos, he was drawing meaningful experiences from his tasks. He was there for the people as much as for the photograph.

The people of his photos were vital to Penn. They were not simply a subject matter; they were the inspiration behind the subject. He worked with people of little social status, such as those in *Small Trades*, and people completely uninfluenced by the modern world, such as those in South Africa. He also worked with models, such as when he photographed *Vogue*'s twelve most prominent models in a group (Figure 9). He had to continually adjust the models because when he would put them into a position and turn back to his camera, they would move back into whatever pose they felt showed off their best assets. The photograph reproduced in Figure 9 included Lisa Fonssagrives, who would later become Penn's wife (Fraser 82). Penn compared photographing all these different people to a "well balanced meal" (Heckert 10). He did not believe that photography needed to have a single focal point and he honed his skills in every

department of the art form. Liberman, who had been questioned about his choices to let Penn photograph whatever he pleased, said that "so clear was Penn's concept, he could move without great convolutions from still life, to fashion, to portraits, to the world outside" (Liberman 6). The content of the photo was what mattered to Penn, not the category.

With that being said, Penn did more than photograph people. He also made a name for himself in still life photography. He began working on still life photography around the 70s (Szarkowski 9). He had done some assignment still life work in *Vogue* but he then went an entirely new direction with it. Penn has famous still lives that range from poppies, to skulls, to his most prominent, cigarette butts (Figures 10-12). He wrote that when he would walk to the train in the evening he saw "a treasure of the city's refuse, intriguing distorted forms of color, stain, and typography" (Liberman 216). He would spend just as much time setting up a still life to photograph as he would spend setting up human models. Penn found and displayed the true beauty in these inanimate objects we see every moment of every day. We see these mundane objects so often that we become numb to them, but Penn transformed them into something electric. Liberman wrote that "after all the fashion, after all the glory, he wants to record the transitory, the passing, the imminence of death" (Liberman 9). Penn did exactly this with his still lives. Typically black and white, occasionally in color, he would create a photograph that delivered a message of what can be overlooked and forgotten and what everything becomes in the end, once it has been left behind.

Penn created so many different emotions through his camera over time, and throughout the years, he attributes much of this to lighting. He was obsessed with photographing his subjects, animate or not, with light from the north. He said "there is a sweetness and constancy to light that falls into a studio from the north and that sets it beyond any other illumination" (Penn 7). One wonders why he preferred light to fall from the north, but throughout all of his books he makes at least one mention of this. With any photo, light is important, but with Penn's photos, light (or lack of it) is the most essential element. "He uses contrasts of light to imprint the spectator's mind; deep, black shadows, luminous highlights" (Liberman 8). This is what Liberman wrote in the introduction of one of Penn's many books. Liberman also said that Penn's use of light, distance, and angles were all "subtle means of making us see a person entirely" (Fraser 100). This may be why Penn rarely used any color in his photographs. The light in the photos illustrated them so well, color was unnecessary. Perhaps it is this lack of color and emphasis on light that froze Penn's images and carries them through time.

Just as he would not have just flicked on a lamp to prepare for his photographs, Penn did not simply instruct a model to sit down and then proceed to snap a million pictures. He planned for hours, set models up into countless poses for long periods of time, and scrutinized the smallest details of every moment (Heckert 22). He went through a painstaking process in order to create these photos every single day. Edmonde Charles-Roux, who had worked with Penn, said "he required his models to pose for unusually long session that demanded great concentration" (Heckert 22). His immense efforts (and his models') are what came together to create the images he is so well known for. His photos leave an impression on viewers because Penn left his impression on his photographs.

All of the fruits of Penn's obsessions cannot be seen in a simple printed photo in a book or magazine, and Penn knew this. He claimed that magazine pages were "something of a dead end" and that a real photographic print was "a thing in itself, not just a halfway house on the way to the page" (Heckert 16). He found beauty in the creation of a photograph, the derivation of a photo from the camera into a negative and then a print. This is what drove Penn into perfecting the platinum print (Heckert 16). Platinum printing is a process of coating a paper in an iron salt, laying a negative on top of it, and exposing it to very strong, harsh light (Travis 20). Penn was known to be one of the very best at using this technique and he often used it on old works, sometimes repeating the process over and over again for years to produce the perfect print. Of a photo from his *Small Trades* project (Figure 3), he claimed to have worked on it for many years and spent thousands of hours "brushing on the liquid coatings, preparing each sheet in anticipation of reaching the perfect print" (Heckert 18). Penn was considered a master of this specific printing method and several of his series contain only photos made with platinum printing (Travis 20). Penn's talent wasn't limited to his famous Rolleiflex alone, he was also able to technically transform his prints into something perfectly unique.

Penn will always be recognized as an idol within the photography world. Alexander Liberman wrote that "a Penn photograph stands out, it has "an immediacy, an impact, and communicates a clear signal of what it is about" (Liberman 8). Anna Wintour, *Vogue*'s current editor-in-chief, since 1988, said Penn "adds a punctuation point to an issue". She felt that his images were strong and they didn't date (Fraser, 246). All of this praise from so many people of high stature in the world of photography, let alone the praise from everyone else, reveals something. It illustrates the strength and power Irving Penn's photographs possess. Penn portrays elegance, ferocity, and humanity in an incomparable fashion. He truthfully portrays his subjects through his technical skill, ideals, passion, and his remarkable eye. Penn may have believed in the transience of life, but his photography will never expire.

Appendix

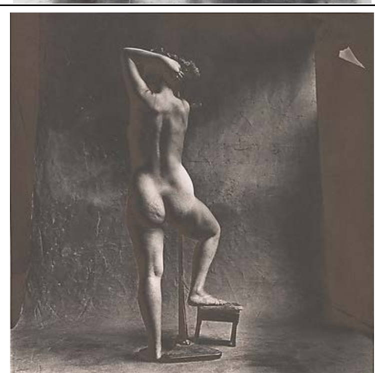
Figure 1: *Women in Wartime* Paris, France; 1950 Magazine Print Featured in: *Vogue* and *On the Edge* *(The Art Stack).*	
Figure 2: *Sculptor's Model with Arms Raised* Paris, France: 1950 Platinum-Palladium Print 49.2 x 23.8 cm (19 3/8 x 19 ¼ in) Featured in: *Small Trades* *(The Metropolitan Museum of Art).*	
Figure 3: *Restaurant Owner* New York, USA; 1951 Platinum-Palladium Print 42.2 x 33.5 cm (16 5/8 x 13 3/16 in) Featured in: *Small Trades* *(The Metropolitan Museum of Art).*	
Figure 4: *Road Sweeper* London, UK; 1950 Platinum-Palladium Print 49.8 x 37 cm (19 5/8 x 14 9/16 in) Featured in: *Small Trades* and *Vogue* *(The Metropolitan Museum of Art).*	

Figure 5: *Brother and Sister* Cuzco, Peru; 1948 Platinum Palladium Print Featured in: *Worlds in a Small Room* and *Passage* *(The Metropolitan Museum of Art).*	
Figure 6: *Three Women* Crete, Greece; 1964 Platinum-Palladium Print Featured in: *Worlds in a Small Room* and *Passage* *(The Metropolitan Museum of Art).*	
Figure 7: *Chieftain's Wife* Cameroon, Africa; 1969 Platinum-Palladium Print Featured in: *Worlds in a Small Room* *(The Metropolitan Museum of Art).*	
Figure 8: *Top Twelve Models of the Forties* New York, USA; 1947 Magazine Print Featured in: *Vogue* and *Passage* *(The Art Stack).*	

Figure 9: *Poppy* (Glowing Embers) (Color) New York, USA; 1968 Magazine Print Featured in: *Still Life* and *Vogue* *(The Metropolitan Museum of Art).*	
Figure 10: *The Poor Lovers* New York, USA; 1979 Featured in: *Still Life* and *Passage* *(The Art Stack).*	
Figure 11: *Cigarette No. 37* New York, USA; 1972 Featured in: *Still Life* and *Passage* *(The Art Stack).*	

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